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ABSTRACT

The impact of state-mandated testing on an urban school district in New Jersey is examined in this paper, which describes the evolution of the testing program and its shift in emphasis from individual student assessment to its use as the primary indicator of school success or failure. To meet state certification standards, 75 percent of the third, sixth, and eighth graders in every school must meet or exceed a state-prescribed minimum level of proficiency. The monitoring process evaluates schools according to 10 elements of acceptable performance, each of which must be met. School report cards indicate that urban districts failed to match the accomplishments of their suburban counterparts. A conclusion is that using the achievement test as a district indicator of academic performance is inappropriate. Recommendations are made to evaluate the testing program and to incorporate higher order thinking into instruction. Four tables are included. (LMI)

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Educational Assessment: Are the Politicians Winning

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Can School Districts Survive the Politics of State Testing Initiatives?

Overview

A state mandated testing program has been in place in New Jersey since the 1976-1977 school year. Initially, minimum basic reading and mathematics skills for students in grades three, six, nine and eleven were tested. These tests were designed to determine a student's eligibility for compensatory education. Revisions in the testing program occurred in 1986 and again in 1990, with further revisions scheduled for 1993-1994. Since 1990, the focus has changed. The state's program has evolved into one of high stakes for students as well as school districts. Students are now tested on higher order skills in the areas of reading and mathematics as well as a holistically scored writing sample. And students are unable to graduate with state endorsed high school diplomas unless they pass all three portions of the test. The increasing degree of difficulty of New Jersey's mandated testing program paralleled (and in several cases was out in front of) the national movement generated by "A Nation at Risk."

Mandated state testing has become high stakes for more than just the students whose graduation from high school is dependent upon passing. The use of the tests themselves has evolved. The results of tests initially designed for use in the classroom to measure student achievement and diagnosis individual weaknesses are now the key components of a complicated state monitoring system. A district in which any school fails to meet state prescribed "Minimal Levels of Proficiency" is not certified. Districts with non-certified schools are subject to state takeover and declared to be "educationally bankrupt."

Testing and politics are inexorably linked in New Jersey; perhaps initially by accident, but now certainly by design. This paper examines the impact of the state mandated testing program on one urban district in New Jersey. It describes the evolution of the testing program and its gradual change in emphasis from individual student assessment to the principal districtwide indicator of success or failure.

The evolution of state mandated testing programs in New Jersey

In New Jersey, high school students must pass a High School Proficiency Test in order to receive a state endorsed high school diploma. Seventy-five percent of third, sixth and eighth grade students in every school must score at or above a state prescribed "Minimal Level of Proficiency" in the areas of reading, writing and mathematics. Otherwise, the school district fails to meet state certification standards. Testing in New Jersey can only be characterized as high stakes; not only for students, but for each of 592 local districts as well.

In 1975, well before the publication of A Nation of Risk generated its recommendations, private sector programs and statewide legislative initiatives, New Jersey's Public School Education Act set new responsibilities for the State Department of Education. Included among them was the monitoring of local school districts to "... provide to all children in New Jersey ... the educational opportunity which will prepare them to function politically, economically and socially in a democratic society." Linked to the new monitoring system was a state testing program with established benchmarks for Minimum Basic Skills in reading and mathematics for grades three, six, nine and eleven.

The state's monitoring system was revised in 1984 and once again in 1987. With each revision came more rigorous standards and a newer test for New Jersey's children.

Assessment Instrument	Year	Grade
Norm Referenced Achievement Tests	1975-present	3 & 6
Minimum Basic Skills Test	1979-1985	11
High School Proficiency Test-9	1986-1992	9
Eighth Grade Early Warning Test	1991-present	8
High School Proficiency Test-11	1994	11

The 1984 revision resulted in the elimination of the Minimum Basic Skills Test (MBST) in grade eleven in favor of the more rigorous High School Proficiency Test (HSPT-9). Beginning in April 1986, all ninth graders were required to pass the HSPT-9. Students could re-take any failed section in their sophomore, junior and senior years. The class of 1990 was the first to graduate under HSPT-9 standards.

In the summer of 1989, before the first HSPT-9 class was even graduated, and certainly before the impact of the HSPT-9 could be evaluated, the State Department of Education moved to replace it with two new testing programs: The Eighth Grade Early Warning Test (EWT-8) and the Eleventh Grade High School Proficiency Test (HSPT-11). These testing programs were developed in large measure because "New Jersey legislators and many citizens' groups have agreed that the (new tests are) necessary to ensure that students are prepared to participate in an increasingly complex and technological society."(New Jersey Department of Education, 1990).

In March 1991, all eighth graders statewide sat for the first administration of the EWT-8. The purpose of this test is to identify students for Basic Skills remediation, assess the effectiveness of the elementary curriculum, and provide an "early warning" for students in danger of failing the new eleventh grade graduation test. This test emphasized the higher order thinking skills not previously found in the HSPT-9. The skills on the eighth grade test are the ones that students must first master if they are to pass the eleventh grade HSPT. The eighth grade class of 1991 will be the first to take the HSPT-11 in December 1993. Skills identified on the HSPT-11 were taken from those on the ninth grade test and expanded to emphasize thinking, problem solving, reasoning and decision making appropriate for eleventh graders.

Mathematics skills measured by the EWT-8 and HSPT-11 are designed to emphasize "practical" mathematics rather than calculation; understanding, not rote learning; application, not abstractions; problem solving, not drill; thinking, not recall. This was a major departure from the older MBST or HSPT-9.

Writing skills measured by the EWT-8 and HSPT-11 are designed to go beyond the simple prompt given to students on the HSPT-9. Students are presented with a problem, situation or controversial issue, given a purpose for writing, the intended audience, and are asked to provide supportive evidence for their solution or position.

Reading skills are expected to read and respond to several kinds of reading material, such as narrative text, informative text, and persuasive/argumentative text. Passages on the eighth grade test are between 700 and 1000 words. Those on the eleventh grade test are between 700 and 2000 words. The HSPT-9 passages are shorter and the questions more of the traditional factual, informational, vocabulary and experience type.

Appendix A shows the evolution of questions from the MBST, HSPT-9, EWT-8 and HSPT-11.

The Monitoring Process and state testing: How districts fail and which districts fail

New Jersey's Manual for the Evaluation of Local School Districts spells out clearly what school districts must do in order to meet state standards and be awarded certification. Ten monitoring elements are identified. Within each element are two or more indicators of acceptable performance; 43 in all. To achieve certification, a district must demonstrate acceptable performance in *all* 43.

New Jersey School Districts are Monitored on these Ten Elements

1. Planning
2. School Community Relations
3. Comprehensive Curriculum and Instruction
4. Student Attendance
5. Facilities
6. Staff
7. Mandated Programs
8. Mandated Basic Skills Tests
9. Equal Educational Opportunity/ Affirmative Action
10. Finance

Few states have been as involved in the measurement of local districts. Governor Thomas Kean and Commissioner of Education Saul Cooperman attempted to build a national reputation based on new testing programs and revised monitoring guidelines. Under their leadership, the state department of education became virtually omnipotent. Under a landmark law passed in 1988, the state gained the authority to take control over local districts that fail to meet minimum state standards. The "take-over law," as it has come to be known, is considered to be the most ambitious school intervention plan in the nation. It allows the state to take control of a school district and run it for at least five years. The district is declared "educationally bankrupt," the superintendent fired, and the board of education removed. To date, the state has taken over two districts, Jersey City and Paterson. Each takeover was based largely on test scores consistently below the established Minimal Levels of Proficiency.

In an effort to appear objective, the monitoring only examines those things that can be quantifiably measured: how many; how long; who attended; was there a public notice within 15 days; is there written documentation; etc. The result, especially in poor districts, becomes the monitoring equivalent to teaching to the test. Contrary to some excellent policy research (Timer and Kirp, 1988; Richards, 1988), New Jersey continued to push the kinds of outcome measures for district accountability that fail to help either the district or its state department.

New Jersey's compliance monitoring does not include classroom observation among any of the 43 indicators. But records of each teacher evaluation must be on file or the district fails one of its "staff" indicators. Law and code dictate the monitoring elements. Richards (1988) expresses certain assumptions of compliance monitoring systems which are based on adequate inputs and resources. Differences between and among schools as a result of resources are not considered. Missing in New Jersey is any measure of growth in terms of student achievement. It is pass fail. And districts that *did* fail were in cities that could only be characterized as:

. urban
. poor
. predominantly minority
. having large numbers of children from families whose native language is not English
. controlled by Democrats

With the election of a new governor and appointment of a new commissioner, state monitoring was suspended in December 1990. There is great expectation that the next round of monitoring guidelines will be more rational, especially with respect to urban districts. But any district that had yet to pass under the old monitoring guidelines, like Trenton, is not held harmless. Trenton was monitored again in April 1991. The district failed to meet Minimal Levels of Proficiency, as well as finance and facility indicators. To date, only a handful of urban districts have met certification standards. It is almost a given that when new Minimal Levels of Proficiency are established based on the EWT-8 and the HSPT-11, these districts will no longer be certified either.

The state's thirty "Special Needs" districts, identified by the New Jersey Supreme Court in its opinion of the *Abbott v. Burke* school funding case, are those with a history of failure. The Quality Education Act of 1990, which stemmed from *Abbott*, provided additional resources into these districts at the expense of a record

tax increase statewide. The tax increase went into effect in July of 1990. The recession hit the state shortly thereafter. By the November 1991 election, the governor lost control of both the senate and assembly and the tax increase was blamed on the needy children in urban districts who have been unable to demonstrate real successes in spite of increases in state funding.

Enrollment in Special Needs Districts as a Percentage of the Total Statewide Enrollment

Districts		Number	Enrollment
Special Needs	#	30	262,211
	%	5.1%	24.1%
Other Districts	#	562	827,435
	%	94.9%	75.9%
Total		592	1,089,646

Although the "Special Needs" districts account for nearly a quarter of the student population in the state, they comprise only five percent of the total number of districts. The reallocation of resources in the name of equity, although the critical component of the *Abbott* decision and the Quality Education Act legislation, has not been a popular one among 95% of the municipalities and their school districts throughout the state.

The Trenton Public Schools serves as an example of a typical urban "Special Needs" district. The city population approaches 90,000. During working hours, these numbers swell to include thousands of state workers - most of whom do not live in Trenton, and few of whom send their children to the public schools. The city itself is located within Mercer County. Neighboring suburban towns and their respective school districts bare little resemblance to Trenton. Princeton serves as the best example. Within Mercer County, Trenton accounts for: 77% of all minorities; 75% of all African Americans; and nearly 80% of all Latinos. Comparing the Trenton schools with the remaining Mercer County districts, Trenton accounts for

76% of all African American students and 85% of all Latino students. Most of these children are poor. Ninety-three percent of the children in the county who are eligible for public assistance attend the Trenton Public Schools.

Establishing a passing score on a norm referenced achievement test

In order to meet state standards, 75% of the third and sixth grade children in all schools in the district must meet or exceed state Minimal Levels of Proficiency (M.L.P.) in Reading, Mathematics and Language or Writing. For Trenton, that translates into 99 independent measures; seventeen elementary schools with grade three, and sixteen elementary schools with grade six must *each* achieve above state standards in three separate tests: 17x3=51; 16x3=48; and 51+ 48 = 99. And only a perfect 99 results in certification. Results of the Spring 1991 testing showed that Trenton met certification standards in 65 of 99 possible measures, or 65.7%.

Complicating things even more is the way in which the M.L.P.s are set by the Department of Education. A different M.L.P. for each grade for each state-approved publisher's test is established (see Appendix B). Trenton uses the 1985 CAT. In Mathematics, M.L.P.s in grade three are set at the 45%ile, and in grade six at the 46%ile. But in spite of protests from the publishers, the local districts - especially the urbans - must struggle to get 75% of their students in each school above the 45th or 46th percentile. In 1991, percents passing ranged from 38.7% to 100%. The percent passing is dependent upon the number of students in a grade in a school. One student scoring below the state cut-off can cause the entire school to fail. This was the case in two elementary schools this past year. One school missed certification in Mathematics in grade six by one student. Another school missed certification in Reading by one student in third grade. Two students kept two schools from full certification. Statewide, the average school district maintains two schools with grades three and six. In Trenton, these numbers are 17 and 16.

Spring 1991 California Achievement Test Results:
A Comparison of N.C.E. and Minimal Levels of Proficiency (M.L.P.)

Grade	Area Tested	N.C.E.	M.L.P.*
Three	Reading	45.3	78.5% passing
	Mathematics	56.7	66.2% passing
	Language	50.1	81.8% passing
Six	Reading	48.7	75.6% passing
	Mathematics	59.9	73.6% passing
	Language	51.7	84.5% passing

* 75% or more is required to meet certification standards

District students score highest in Mathematics in terms of N.C.E., yet they fail to meet state Minimal Levels of Proficiency. M.L.P.'s are met in Reading and Language in spite of lower N.C.E.s. Explaining all of this to laymen is an annual chore that few districts look forward to doing.

Budgets, property taxes and test results

For the second consecutive year, the State Department of Education published district report cards timed for distribution to arrive just days before school board elections and budget approvals. The Report Card linked costs per pupil, teacher salaries, S.A.T. scores, Minimal Levels of Proficiency for grades three and six, results of the Eighth Grade Early Warning and High School Proficiency tests, attendance and graduation data. While care was taken to cite the usual caveats with respect to correlation and causality, they went mostly unheeded.

To the surprise of no one, outcomes reported for the state's urban districts failed to approach those of their successful suburban neighbors. Report card data were quoted by members of the new majority in the state house as reason to dismantle the Quality Education Act and roll back taxes. It is unlikely that the current funding formula, one designed expressly to allow urban districts to compete on a "level playing field" with the state's wealthier districts, will survive past 1992-1993.

What needs to change (and what are the chances that anything will) if school districts are to survive the politics of state testing initiatives.

> Perhaps the politicians in the state house should be required to read the special section of the November 1991 *Kappan*, Accountability As a Reform Strategy. It may be, however, that many of the legislators lack the higher order thinking skills necessary to comprehend the damage that they may be doing by continuing to evaluate local school districts based on a test score. It may also be that professional staff working within the department of education could learn the lesson that Madaus (1991) presents: "The history of testing provides many examples of how tests designed for one purpose have been used - and misused - for another." It is certainly a giant leap to take an achievement test initially designed to diagnose individual strengths and weaknesses for classroom instruction, generate a passing score for it, and use it as the key indicator of success for a district based on the results in two grades.

> No new testing programs should be developed and adopted statewide unless and until the previous new testing program has been evaluated in terms of demonstrable student outcomes. In New Jersey, the EWT-8 and the HSPT-11 were well into the development stage before the first class to take the HSPT-9 had even graduated. The only thing close to an evaluation of the HSPT-9 as a good graduation test came from an examination of New Jersey college freshmen entering the New Jersey State College system. The report by the New Jersey Basic Skills

Council showed freshmen "lacked proficiency." Passing scores for the class of 1990 were actually five percentage points *worse* than they were the year before. One is unsure whether yet another, tougher high school graduation test is the answer.

> If school districts must be evaluated based on a standardized instrument, than "passing the test" should be placed in some kind of context. In spite of repeated requests over the last six years, the State Department has yet to produce the equating study that generated the M.L.P.s that districts must achieve. Nor has the department provided a rationale for the selection of 75% as a passing mark.

> School districts, particularly urban ones, should not be mandated to concentrate exclusively on the basic skills if their children will be evaluated on new instruments that assess only higher order and critical thinking skills. Students become the victims of instruction that is incomplete, and the schools they attend are considered to be inadequate. The state's new eighth and eleventh grade tests are very good instruments. But the instructional materials in most urban school districts in New Jersey are not geared toward higher order skills. Neither, regrettably, have enough teachers been trained in their use. It is logical to believe that the training of staff and the instruction of children should precede any summative assessment. A baseball pitcher does not prepare for the season by throwing footballs. But our children take tests that demand critical thinking skills after an entire year of drill and practice.

> Because of the way in which school districts are funded, it becomes extremely important for a district to test well. Suburban districts take one week out each spring to administer achievement tests and then go on with their regular instructional program. In urban districts, the test upon which the district is evaluated too often *becomes* the district's curriculum.

> Performance assessment is missing in most urban districts. While staff might be aware of its existence, attended seminars or read journal articles, there is precious little time for it in districts that are low achieving. And the irony of it is that these are the children that stand to benefit the most.

Are the politicians winning? If New Jersey serves as an example, one is left with the feeling that it is not in the best interest of most politicians to go much beyond a number or a set of numbers when it comes to evaluating public education. Politicians are not anxious to hear the explanations of basic assumptions about educational assessment. It is too time consuming. And for those in urban school districts, the explanations are too frequently heard as excuses.

Teachers must be provided with all the necessary support. They must be well trained and strong enough to teach what it is that children must know. Politicians are elected or defeated. A child's academic career generally exceeds that of the average politician. Perhaps that means that good education and rational assessment will win out in the end.